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ABSTRACT

To explain the development of the performance studies department at New York University (NYU), this paper describes the early years of the department as it began in the graduate drama department, noting how an association of concerned people, including Robert Corrigan, Richard Schechner, Monroe Lippman, Michael Kirby, and Brooks McNamara, and their insistence on the importance of their own particular interests led to the integrated approach NYU now has. It also explains how the magazine "Carleton Drama Review" evolved into the "Tulane Drama Review" and then into "The Drama Review" and was used to great effect in espousing an integrated approach to theatre by many of the people listed above. (CRH)

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PERFORMANCE STUDIES: NOTES ON THE EARLY YEARS

Recently, someone--I'm not sure just who--wrote promotional copy about our department at New York University. The copy spoke of "defining a new area of scholarship" called performance studies, and noted that "research in this new field is expanding the very concept of theatre and dance. It is bringing the social sciences and the arts together." Performance studies, the copy continues, "goes beyond dramatic literature, behond theatre and dance history, beyond familiar forms. It encompasses non-Western, indigenous, folk, and post-modern performance--from everyday interactions to shamanism, from Broadway to Kabuki, from ballet to burlesque."

While some of us who teach in the department might argue about the nuances of the statement, it seems to be a clear description of the approach that has been developing at NYU for the last fifteen years or so. Let me try to explain briefly something about the early years and about how I believe that approach came to be. In a word, I think that it grew out of a somewhat unlikely association of people and their vigorous insistence on the importance of their own particular interests. Performance studies emerged somehow as the thread that connected thos interests, or perhaps as the point of intersection among them.

In the mid-fifties, as many of you know, a young professor named Robert Corrigan founded a magazine called the

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Carleton Drama Review, a liberal-spirited, progressive journal about theatre and dramatic literature. In 1957 Corrigan joined the theatre faculty at Tulane and took the magazine with him, renaming it the Tulane Drama Review. At Tulane, increasingly, the magazine became involved with the cause of the Absurdist dramatists, stoutly defending them against charges of quackery from the critical and intellectual Establishment.

The liberal TDR co-existed somewhat uneasily with the rather traditional academic theatre department in which it was based. And the tension was not lessened when Richard Schechner, a former student in the department, replaced Corrigan as a faculty member and editor of the Tulane Drama Review in 1962. As Schechner's student and an assistant on TDR in the 'sixties, I watched him radicalize the magazine and raise the consciousness of a number of the students--as well as the blood pressure of many faculty members and TDR subscribers.

In no small part, uneasiness about Schechner was bound up with what may be the first link in performance studies, his fervent endorsement of radical experiment in the theatre--not simply in playwriting, but in every aspect of mise-en-scene, in the politics of performance, and even in the theoretical bases of theatre. To many people, trained in classic texts and traditional staging methods, this smacked of quackery of the most outrageous sort. Yet Schechner pugnaciously insisted that experimental performance had to be given serious consideration, and that classic works were open to critical approaches

and production possibilities far beyond anything currently being conceived of in America in the 'sixties.

But that story is fairly well known. What is perhaps most important here is that Schechner, as both editor and teacher at Tulane, generally displayed a kind of lack of enthusiasm for the truisms of theatre practice and scholarship that made the usual sort of academic communication impossible. In the classroom, as well as in the pages of TDR, he ignored traditional questions and answers about theatre and dramatic literature. In their place he substituted his own questions and answers, many of which seemed bizarre to conventionally trained theatre people. From the start, however, it was clear that he had abandoned the conventional rules of the game as personally uninteresting and was attempting to work out a new and more satisfying set of his own. It was this impulse, I think, that represented a second link in what was to become performance studies.

During the late 'sixties Corrigan had become dean of a new performing arts school at New York University. In 1967 Schechner and Monroe Lippman, former chairman of theatre at Tulane, moved to NYU to establish a new graduate program in theatre history and theory to be called the Graduate Drama Department. Along with Schechner came TDR, once again changing its name. This time it became The Drama Review, even though the magazine--like the new NYU department--had little to do with drama except as one element in performance. The next year, 1968, I joined Lippman and Schechner in New York.

Perhaps this is the place to say a word about Monroe

Lippman's function in what was developing. Although he did not stay long at NYU, Lippman--both at Tulane and in New York--was a kind of catalyst in the search for fresh approaches to theatre scholarship. Lippman's own theatrical interests were then--and I trust still are--basically traditional and conservative. But personally, and as an administrator, he was the most liberal of liberal spirits, with a passionate interest in freedom of intellectual inquiry. It was he, for example, who resolutely championed the Tulane Drama Review in the face of a highly unenthusiastic response from many close friends and colleagues--and, I suspect, in the face of his own conviction that much that was published there was nonsense. And it was Lippman, at NYU, who created and promoted a program which was unorthodox from the outset--a process which he irreverantly referred to as "giving you people enough rope to hang yourselves with."

Among the strands of that rope were the rather off-beat interests which both Schechner and I were developing and applying to the study of theatre. Increasingly, Schechner began to be attracted by the relationships between anthropology and the theatre. At the same time I began to move in a somewhat related and unusual direction. It had always seemed odd to me that theatre historians had generally concentrated on the so-called "great achievements" in the theatre to the exclusion of most of what actually took place there. Gradually, I had come to believe that all sorts of performance were--as I said in an article at the time--"worth equal consideration by students and scholars as. . .channels through which

the community celebrates itself, its heroes, its triumphs and its past history."

My own particular interests began more and more to settle on two related, largely ignored and not quite respectable areas of performance--folk and popular entertainments. And I often found that concepts developed in relation to experimental performance by Schechner and another colleague, Michael Kirby, could be re-applied to my exploration of these traditional performance forms. From Kirby's work on Happenings, for example, I borrowed the concept of "compartmented" structure, out of which I developed the idea of "variety" structure as a central organizational device of popular entertainment. From Schechner's theory of experimental performance I took the concept of "environmental" performance, which I tried to show was, in fact, a recurrent approach to organizing folk and popular performance space throughout history. It was perhaps out of borrowings such as these that the idea of comparative performance studies first began to appear.

I hasten to add that outside the department, such peculiar views were often greeted with scorn and a certain alarm by conservative scholars. Yet, the basic idea that all forms of theatre--or rather, all forms of <u>performance</u>--could and <u>should</u> be studied comparatively became yet another important link in the development of performance studies, a link also clearly seen in Schechner's concern with connections between such diverse forms as ritual, avant-garde and Asian performance.

Earlier I mentioned Michael Kirby. His association with Schechner goes back some twenty years, to an issue of

the Tulane Drama Review, which Kirby edited, devoted to Happenings and related forms of experimental performance. A "Happener" and a sculptor with a background in theatre, Kirby tended to accept as perfectly reasonable many of the concepts that irritated conservative critics of TDR. Probably for that reason he later came to the Graduate Drama Department where he got a Ph.D. and, in the early '70s, joined the faculty and took over editorship of The Drama Review. Kirby's chief interest over the years has been the contemporary and historical avant-garde, but he has also been strongly identified, both as editor and teacher, with three allied concepts: an anti-critical approach,and the related ideas of "documentation" and "recreation."

In a history of TDR which I wrote earlier this year, I quoted Kirby about these concepts. "Reviewing a performance," he once said in TDR, "means evaluating it. We are not interested in opinions and value judgments about what is 'good' and what is 'bad.' We feel that the detailed and accurate documentation of performances is preferable and gives sufficient grounds for the reader to make his own value judgments. Of course we realize that implicit value judgments on our part are involved in the selection process itself, but these can be intellectual rather than emotional, and they should not be involved in the presentation of material. 'Reviewing' usually, although not necessarily, involves interpretation. We are not interested in interpretation, in the explication of 'meaning,' in the explanation of one thing in terms of another. These processes are subjective and personal; although they may make interesting

reading, there is no need for documentation to be impressionistic." Kirby went on to tell me in an interview that "documentation of current performance is the same thing as reconstruction of a historical one. In both cases," he says, "I think the important thing is to make the material available. I trust to the personal taste of the people who read the documentations and reconstructions. It's the same thing as seeing a performance; some may like it, some not." Indeed, some like Kirby's ideas and some agressively do not, but it is clear that they have emerged over the years as another important element in the growth of performance studies at NYU, although they are not often applied with the kind of rigor that Kirby himself would call for.

I should mention one last figure--one who represented a kind of balance to Kirby's intensely anti-critical approach. Ted Hoffman's relationship with Schechner goes back to the mid-'sixties when, for a time, he served as associate editor of the Tulane Drama Review, and was referred to in a Time magazine article as "homme terrible" to Schechner's "enfant terrible." Like Schechner, Hoffman also wound up at NYU in the late 'sixties, and for some time taught in the Graduate Drama Department when not on other assignments at the School of the Arts. What Hoffman--a long-time critic and full-time iconoclast--brought to the program was a strong interest in theatrical criticism and dramaturgy, two areas that also were to become very important in shaping the direction of performance studies.

I suppose it is clear by now that from the first there

was considerable diversity--not to say eccentricity--in the approaches represented with the Graduate Drama Department. As a result, in the early years, there was some anxiety among both faculty and students about what, if anything, bound these approaches together into a viable whole. Perhaps, at the beginning, nothing did--or at least nothing concrete. The pages of The Drama Review, with which three of us were connected, served as a center of focus of a sort, but as far as teaching went, a coherent direction was probably more in the air than on the table. We were not training our students as other departments did, but it was not clear just how we were training them. Or for what. Clearly something needed to be done to chart a clearer direction for all concerned. There were plenty of suggestions from everybody--each generally more complex and unworkable than the last.

Let me offer one example. For a while, in the early 'seventies, the Graduate Drama Department mysteriously moved in the direction of a fairly conventional theory and history curriculum--probably not very different from that found in most graduate theatre programs around the country. Each member of the department taught a course or two that reflected his own particular interests, but the overall curriculum represented a somewhat half-hearted attempt to "unify" the program. We offered, at one point, such academic old favorites as Greek and Roman Theatre, Theatre of the Middle Ages, Restoration and 18th Century, and so on.

In retrospect, it ought to have been fairly obvious from the start that such a chronological approach was bound

to be a failure all around. Within a short time it became a source of frustration to both students and faculty because it was painfully obvious that the faculty really didn't think that way. Schechner's developing interest in anthropology, and my increasing concern with folklore and popular culture, for example, could only come in around the edges of such courses. Again and again the question arose as to whether there was any reason to try to be balanced and well-rounded when, if the truth were known, each of us was only interested in what he was interested in. Each time we talked it over, it became clearer that traditionally organized courses could not unify us or our curriculum, but could only act as an impediment to what each of us could do best--teach his own enthusiasms and his own point of view. At last I think that we came to the conclusion that the real focus of our program ought to be on that very diversity, and on the points of agreement that obviously existed among us. Because, as I suggested at the beginning, as diverse as our work was, there were always important crossovers.

The point here is simply that out of such intersections performance studies began to appear. In the mid-'seventies we started to integrate dance history courses. And somewhere along the line in the 1970s the two words "performance studies" began to be used by us to describe the aggregate of our work. Later in the 'seventies, with what I think was a collective sigh of relief, we finally replaced the not-very-appropriate name of our department--"Graduate Drama"--with the name "Performance Studies." And that, I think, was the end of the

early years about which I came here to talk--and the official beginning of that new field which--as the promotional copy reads--"goes beyond dramatic literature, beyond theatre and dance history, beyond familiar forms."

--Brooks McNamara